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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# The Crisis in Gulf Relations: Old Rivalries, New Ambitions

The Crisis in Gulf Relations

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### **Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies**

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

[www.dohainstitute.org](http://www.dohainstitute.org)

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## Introduction

On the morning of Wednesday May 24, Qataris woke up to a sensationalist media vilification campaign led by Emirati and Saudi broadcasters and other media institutions, targeting the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani. It later emerged that statements falsely attributed to the Emir as part of the media campaign were entirely fabricated. Hackers who commandeered the website of the Qatar News Agency (QNA) on the night of 23/24 May had planted the misattributed statement, purportedly delivered by Sheikh Tamim during the latest graduation ceremony held for Qatari conscripts the previous day<sup>1</sup>. These allegations triggered a two-week long, frenzied media campaign attack against Qatar by UAE- and Saudi Arabia-based media. The extent of the vitriol, and the willingness to attack members of Qatar's ruling family, have completely overturned the established norms of Gulf inter-state relations.

Following the same "shock and awe" tactics, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt all announced in the early hours of Monday, June 5, that they would sever all diplomatic and consular relations with Qatar. The parties also announced a full blockade of Qatar, covering its (single) land border with Saudi Arabia as well as the country's air and seaports. This extended to transit travel across the region, with all planes travelling to and from Qatar prevented from landing in Saudi, Emirati or Egyptian airports. Qatari diplomats were given 48 hours to leave the blockading countries while other Qatari nationals were allowed two weeks to leave.

## The Roots of the Crisis

Since 1995, Qatari foreign policy has been defined by its dynamics and flexibility, giving the country the ability to balance relations with a variety of major players in the region and across the globe. Qatar was able to build robust relations with the United States—hosting one of the world's largest US military bases at Al Udeid, in the south of the country—while simultaneously strengthening ties with some of the US' traditional foes. A series of international conferences and symposia which the country hosted and sponsored became a tool in the Qatari soft power repertoire. To this was added the Al Jazeera network, which precipitated the discussion of previously taboo topics across the entire Arab region. The broadcaster addressed some of the

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<sup>1</sup> Qatar has had universal conscription for males since 2015.

most pressing, often ignored, topics in the Middle East. It screened Arab intellectuals and political activists from a wide array of political trends and currents which had been previously suppressed in their home countries. Domestically too, Qatar bore witness to change, with an air of increased openness leading to a wider role for women in the public space and the liberalization of education as well as hosting campuses of US universities. Additionally, the country offered a space to open-minded Muslim religious leaders to help formulate a renewed understanding of the Islamic faith. At the same time, a personal donation from the then-Emir, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa, made possible the construction of Christian churches in the country. Finally, Qatar has also been, for the past two decades, steadfast in supporting resistance to Israeli aggression in both Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. These changes pioneered by Qatar in its foreign and media policies have been a source of irritation for some of its neighbors in the region—and in particular Saudi Arabia—providing for periodic crises in their relations.

Many of these Arab governments chose to blame the media—and in particular, the Al Jazeera network hosted by Qatar—for the Arab Spring, instead of engaging in any serious introspection of their own conduct. The dignified, civilized model of protest which young Arabs presented in capitals across the region won the admiration of the West and the wider world, leading even the United States to consider abandoning some of its most long-standing allies such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. This heightened the pressure felt in many Arab capitals. While most Arab governments were on the back foot, waiting to react to events on the ground, Doha and the Al Jazeera network were in their prime, playing a vibrant role across the region. A reversal of fortunes was quick in the making however.

A watershed moment for both the Arab Spring and Qatari foreign policy came in 2013. At that point, revolutionary momentum began to slow due to the flaws of the opposition movements, the mistakes made by Islamists who had come to power in Egypt as well as the violence of the standing regimes and the ambitions harbored by military officers to rule. The power of a counter-revolutionary surge was quickly visible on two fronts. In Egypt support from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates allowed a junta to reverse the gains of the January 25, 2011 uprising which removed Mubarak while in Syria Iranian backing allowed the Assad regime to launch a military counter attack against opposition groups. Counter-revolutionary forces were quick to blame Qatar for the frustrations they faced in pushing back the clock on the gains made by the Arab peoples during the Arab Spring.

Led by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, these counter-revolutionary forces held Qatar responsible for foiling their plans to reverse the gains of the Arab Spring. The June, 30, 2013 coup which removed Egypt's first democratically president exposed the rift between these two Gulf countries, together with Bahrain, and Qatar. The governments of those three countries withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar by the beginning of 2014, marking the crescendo of a crisis which lasted for a full seven months.

## A Crisis Renewed

The prevailing circumstances at the time prevented the parties from achieving a final and complete resolution to the crisis of 2013/2014. The latest escalation against Doha, surfacing in mid-May, 2017, allowed the other Gulf countries to rekindle that conflict. This is despite Qatari adherence to the Gulf consensus on a number of key regional issues; from the conflict in Yemen, to the Syrian crisis, to Iran and the battle against terrorism. The election of Donald Trump to the White House seems also to have emboldened voices antagonistic to Qatar in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. In concert with other factors, domestic and foreign, the Trump presidency created the right environment for an alliance between the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the Deputy Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, and for the leadership of those two countries to relaunch their attack on Qatar. This came into focus with the summit in the Saudi capital that brought the new, visiting US president together with leaders from the Arab and wider Islamic world. At the time, Saudi Arabian communications sought to play down the extent of involvement from Qatar, likewise that of Jordan, in the summit while accentuating the role played by Egypt and the UAE. Indications of a deep-rooted crisis in relations rose to the surface within two days following that summit.

The intensity of the UAE and Saudi media campaign continued unabated even in the face of stringent Qatari denials that the Emir had even made those statements, and in the face of confirmations from several other countries that the QNA website was in fact hacked. That the facts on the ground did not affect the media campaign lends credence to the idea that Qatar was in fact being targeted by a premeditated campaign. In fact, a media campaign orchestrated by the UAE and waged across US publications predated even the statements misattributed to Sheikh Tamim. As Qatar's Foreign Minister observed, the five weeks preceding the hacking saw 13 separate opinion pieces attacking Qatar appear in the US media, as well as a major conference focused on Qatar held in the US capital to which no Qatari representative was invited<sup>2</sup>.

One distinguishing feature of the latest media campaign against Qatar, as seen in the Arabic language mouthpieces of the UAE and Saudi governments, is the willingness of the attackers to enjoin in personal, ad hominem attacks on members of the Qatari ruling family and even to cast doubt on the ruling Al Thani's legitimacy to govern. This is entirely unprecedented in relations between the Gulf States, where previous conflicts have tended to avoid involving individual members of the ruling families. Such a move would previously have been viewed as destabilizing to the foundations of hereditary rule which characterize all members of the GCC.

The latest attack on Qatar has undertaken at its core a number of accusations regarding Qatari foreign affairs which have no basis in reality, and which vanish entirely when brought under the slightest scrutiny. Chief among these are the suggestions that Qatar is a state sponsor of terrorism, that it is working to strengthen its relationship with Iran, or that it destabilizes its neighbors and allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council. These baseless accusations are discredited by the fact that none other than US President Donald Trump, when meeting Sheikh Tamim at the Riyadh Summit, praised Qatar for its role in the war against terrorism. In terms of a Qatari relationship with Iran, the fact is that Doha has paid a higher price than any other Gulf country for the breakdown of its relations with Tehran. This includes not only the ransoms paid to free Qatari citizens who were captured in Iraq, but also the political capital it lost through cutting ties with Iran. Meanwhile, the UAE was busy expanding its strong economic ties to Tehran, with 80% of Iranian trade passing through the Emirates, which have long provided a vital transit port for goods bound for Iran.

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<sup>2</sup> See statement by Qatari Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Abdulrahman Al Tahni, published as part of a joint press conference with the Foreign Minister of Somalia, 25 May, 2017: <https://www.mofa.gov.qa/en/all-mofa-news/details/2017/05/25/foreign-minister-'qatar-will-address-the-media-campaign-targeting-it'>

An illustration of these ties was painted by the Iranian Ambassador to Abu Dhabi, speaking in Tehran to an Emirati trade delegation in June, 2014<sup>3</sup>. Mohammed Ali Fayyad pointed out how trade between Iran and the UAE, while fluctuating between 2010 and 2013, skyrocketed in 2014, making the Emirates Iran's most important trading partner ahead of China, India, South Korea and Turkey<sup>4</sup>. This hasn't stopped the Emirates from adopting the most outwardly belligerent tone with respect to Iran.

The campaign against Qatar has also alleged that Doha supports the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar has repeatedly made clear that it has never been a sponsor of the Brotherhood, an organization with which it has its differences. Nonetheless, Doha refuses to brand the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, a move which it sees as both inaccurate and counterproductive to the battle against genuine terrorist organizations.

The insinuation that Qatar is a state sponsor of terrorism is easily discredited by the country's strong participation in the war in terror. Today, accusations that Qatar supports terrorism can only be used to mean one thing, namely that the country should no longer host Hamas. Indeed, people would do well to remember that Saudi Arabia was only very recently the target of a campaign which sought to make Riyadh culpable for the September 11, 2001 attacks, led by the same groups who are today victimizing Qatar.

## Conclusion

Whatever surreptitious motives are declared, the present day attack against Qatar clearly has one aim in mind: it is a naked attempt by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia to bring Qatar into line on their foreign policy agenda. This is particularly true with regards to the relationship with the present regime in Egypt, which is seen in both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi as a floodgate against the winds of change sweeping through the region. One final salient point is the support of the Israeli lobby in Washington. The extent of coordination with the Israelis has been brought to light by newly released correspondence between Yousef Al Otaiba, Abu Dhabi's Ambassador to Washington, and members of known pro-Israeli groups, who appear to share the goal of demonizing Qatar.

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<sup>3</sup> See, "UAE-Iran Trade Volume Reaches \$15.7 billion in 2013", *Al Alam* (Tehran), June 1, 2014, available online (link in Arabic): <http://www.alalam.ir/news/1599121>

<sup>4</sup> See, "The Truth Behind Emirati-Iranian Trade Links", *Al Arab* (London), January 31, 2016, available online (link in Arabic): <http://www.alarab.co.uk/?id=71991>

Qatar cannot be expected to surrender its foreign policy in the midst of such a threatening environment and in the midst of a blockade born of media fabrications. Any exit from the crisis requires a dialogue between the two sides, in which a mutual understanding is achieved not by way of threats and capitulations.

Any outcomes of this attack on Qatar will ultimately rely on the position in Washington. Although it is difficult to imagine that the three Gulf States, in addition to Egypt, took these measures against their neighbor without consulting the United States, Washington has so far appeared only on the sidelines of this crisis. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, commenting during a visit to Australia, said only that the US was encouraging the sides to the conflict to settle their differences and stressed that the Gulf Cooperation Council must maintain its unity. Likewise it seems that Washington will continue to oppose any attempt to disrupt the regional balances that it is keen to maintain in the Gulf region. This is especially so given that Qatar retains its largest military base in the Middle East, and Washington may be wary of pushing Hamas back into the arms of Iran.